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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0676
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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S POLITICS

REF: CHIANG MAI 41 (CHOKING IN CHIANG MAI)

¶1. (SBU) Northern Thailand's continuing environmental crisis has some locals complaining about the lack of governmental action and recalling the action-oriented style of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. With the heavy haze over the north topic number one in Chiang Mai, one rumor has it that pro-Thaksin forestry officials are less than eager to douse the fires that have smothered the region in a blanket of smoke. At a minimum, people note that appointed ministers lack the political drive to deal with the problem forcefully.

¶2. (SBU) While commentators blame the regional pollution on a variety of possible culprits - from garbage burning to Korean barbecue restaurants - most agree that forest fires are a primary source. As the air worsened over the past two weeks, authorities seemed helpless to enforce the law against burning. Current fires as well as blackened areas are visible on the outskirts of Chiang Mai.

¶3. (SBU) The unabated burning led some to wonder why forestry officials couldn't do more to extinguish the fires. For an explanation they harked back to Thaksin's time, when then-Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Yongyut Tiypairat reportedly countered anti-Thaksin demonstrations by organizing forestry workers under his ministry to attack protest gatherings in Bangkok. The post-coup interim government later refused to renew contracts for temporary forest guards, leaving the affected workers disgruntled and lessening the department's capacity to carry out its duties. As a result, rumor mongers suggested that officials might have their own agenda in ignoring violations of the forestry and environmental laws. They claimed that Thaksin and former minister Yongyut still hold sway over a large number of forestry personnel, adding that many government units have shifted into "neutral gear" under the present interim government.

¶4. (SBU) Faced with smoky skies and cough-inducing air, even some anti-Thaksin partisans admit to a touch of nostalgia for the days when the former Prime Minister would fly to Chiang Mai with a portfolio of projects for his home town. In contrast to those days, one reported overhearing a visiting Public Health Ministry official on the phone March 12 saying "the situation in Chiang Mai is OK; it's just a hazy sky".

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Although everyone from the mayor to the Prime Minister has addressed the north's air quality crisis, the government at all levels seems powerless to enforce the ban on burning. While the idea of passive resistance from forestry officials may be farfetched, the official ineptness in dealing with an environmental and health disaster that has drawn international attention is not increasing confidence in the interim government.

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